

CHURCHES OF NORTHERN ARMENIA.

BY SIR MARTIN CONWAY.

WHILE the most terrible and extensive war the world has ever undergone is being waged in such well known regions as Belgium, France, North Italy, Macedonia and Egypt, it is not surprising that less information should be available with regard to the theatres of the Eastern campaigns,

like Mesopotamia, various parts of Africa, and Armenia. Few people at home know those regions, and even the names of places mentioned mean nothing to them. The destruction of Louvain and Rheims, the peril still to be evaded of other Belgian and North Italian cities—these horrors are generally realised and deplored; but how many are conscious of the danger that has threatened remoter architectural treasures? some of them of an almost unique importance, and the more to be deplored because the threatened buildings have not been thoroughly studied, planned and photographed; so that if destroyed their loss would be total.

Across the major part of the continent of Asia there stretches an elevated plateau region. It is widest north of India, where it bears the name of Tibet. Further west it

narrows into a knot of mountains, the highest group in the world, and then widens out again, becoming first the high areas of Afghanistan and Persia and then, further west, the similar elevated district called Armenia. Beyond that, again to the westward, the elevation diminishes all across Asia Minor and the plateau ultimately dips into the Aegean

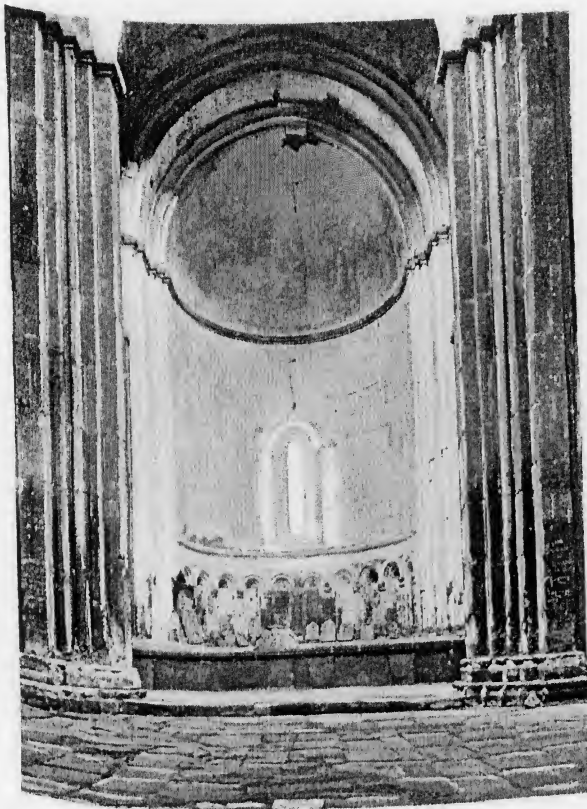
and concerns us here no more. The highlands of Armenia are bounded on the north and south by two deep depressions. That on the north is the long Georgian valley running from the Black Sea to the Caspian, itself bounded further north by the great Caucasian range. The depression on to which Armenia looks down on the south is the Mesopotamian plain.

On this highland of Armenia a brave and hardy folk have lived from a remote antiquity; and we know something of their doings from the contact of the

Assyrians and other peoples with them at various dates. They are a gifted race and possess an ancient civilisation, but we cannot in this place linger over that. The interested reader should refer to the classical work on the country, admirably written and illustrated by my able and learned friend, the late Mr. H. F. B. Lynch, at one time M.P. for Ripon, whose



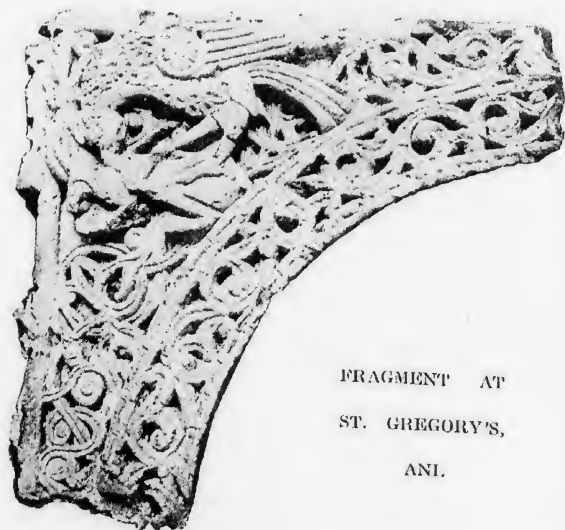
ANI CATHEDRAL FROM THE SOUTH-EAST.



ANI: ST. GREGORY FROM THE WEST.

journeys in Armenia and close study of the country made him beyond question the greatest recent authority upon it. I am enabled to illustrate this article with some of the blocks made for his book from his own photographs. A glance at any map will show that the Armenian area thus described is divided into two main parts, a northern and a southern, by the mountain range which culminates in Ararat. About half of northern Armenia belonged to Russia before the war. The remainder of the north and all the southern part were under the misgovernance of Turkey. The great battle of Sarikamish, which attracted a momentary attention last winter, was brought about by an attempt of the Turks, based on Erzerum in their part of northern Armenia, to invade Russian Armenia. If that attack had succeeded the most precious ancient buildings of the country would have been seriously imperilled.

The fates of northern and southern Armenia, though similar, have not been identical. Sometimes united under a single government they have oftener been divided; but they have passed through similar stages of civilisation and gave birth to closely related schools of art. Christianity obtained ascendancy over them at a very early date and took such firm hold that all the floods of Islam have not been able to overwhelm it. Long before the tenth century every centre of population in the country had its churches and its monasteries, built in a markedly local style of architecture of great merit. Numbers of these monuments have been destroyed, but the ruins of many (and a few still complete) survive, those of chief importance in northern Armenia



FRAGMENT AT
ST. GREGORY'S,
ANI.

being at the deserted mediæval capital, Ani, and the existing ecclesiastical capital, Edgmiatsin.

In the case of any group of works of art of a single school it is always most interesting to approach a study of them in chronological order. Lack of space renders that method here impossible. Let us therefore at once turn to one of the best examples of the developed Armenian type of church—the tenth century cathedral of Ani. It lies, pathetically abandoned, in a bare space in the midst of the ruined city. Nothing could be plainer than its simple oblong form; no external apse, no protruding transepts, no advancing porches or other embellishments. It was, indeed, once crowned in the midst by a small cylindrical dome covered by a pointed roof, but only a fragment of the dome survives. The external arcading descends directly from Sassanian Persia.

Other elements in the composition are derived from Syria, Mesopotamia, and Constantinople, but are originally combined. The curious pairs of deep niches at the end and sides of the church correspond to masses of masonry within, which form the apse and its side chapels, for the interior is far more complicated in plan than the rectangular exterior would suggest. It is, however, the general aspect of the interior that is the most remarkable feature. At a first glance it looks like the inside of a Gothic church. The pointed vault and arches, the recessed piers resembling clustered columns in effect—these and other details have an extraordinarily Gothic aspect, so that it is at first hard to realise that Gothic architecture had not appeared in its most rudimentary form when the Cathedral of Ani was built. The most cursory inspection reveals the excellence of the masonry, the good



ANI: CHAPEL OF ST. GREGORY.

taste and restraint of the carved decoration, the fine proportion of parts. We are in presence of a work of architectural art, the product of no immature school, but of one fully equipped with a formed and finished style, which is not that of the Byzantine nor of any other school, but belongs entirely to Armenia and Georgia.

Unfortunately, the churches of Armenia have not only suffered from neglect and war, but many of them have been shattered by earthquakes, so that of the multitude that once existed few are now even as well preserved as this of Ani. Near to it, within the walls of the same city, is the



ANI: NORTH WALL OF ST. GREGORY.

scarcely less beautiful Church of St. Gregory, the dome of which is still in large part standing, but the porch, with massive columns added to it in the Saracenic style in the thirteenth century, has mainly fallen away. The delicately sculptured arcading round the exterior of this church might stand comparison with similar decorative work in any Byzantine building, though the style of it is pure Armenian at its best. Not far away is a chapel dedicated to the same saint—a polygonal edifice surmounted by a circular dome with pointed roof. This was probably a royal mausoleum, and the type, simplified and Islamised, continued to be erected in different parts of Armenia down to the close of the middle age. All these buildings are abandoned ruins and are undisfigured by later additions. At Edgmiatsin are several ancient churches still in use. Such, for instance, is the venerated cathedral, the seat of the important functionary, the Katholikos, revered by all Armenians. The core of the building is of great antiquity and the fabric of the walls of the central mass may date back to the seventh century, but the old is so hidden by additions, porches, chapels, and so forth, that little of antiquity is suggested by the exterior.

Far more interesting to the lover of art is the church of St. Ripsime in the same town. Its aspect is injured by the porch which, in characteristically seventeenth century style, has been patched on at one end. The Armenians of that date had a strange passion for building such porches and almost every church still in use has had one added on to it. With that exception and a restored dome the rest of the main fabric is old, if not dating back as far as the year 618 when the church is known to have been rebuilt. The high gabled projections with their deep pairs of niches can scarcely be earlier than the tenth century. More authentically ancient is the church called Shoghakath in the same city; it was built in the fifth decade of the seventh century. The massive western porch, wide as the whole nave, is surmounted by the usual bell tower and both are remarkable works authentically dated 1693. The un instructed eye would have guessed them rather of the twelfth century! Such was the vitality of the Armenian tradition in architecture.

Ani and Edgmiatsin might be expected, as capitals, to possess ecclesiastical buildings of importance; no doubt churches, convents and memorial chapels were more numerous in them than elsewhere. But every centre of population, even though small, had its church, and all these churches, so far as we can now attain knowledge of them, appear to have been built in the same style with the same good taste and the same finish of detail. Let it suffice if I cite one more, the ruined convent of Marmashen in the neighbourhood of Alexandropol. The two little buildings that remain stand on the rocky banks of the Arpa Chai, a remote tributary of the Araxes. The church (988-1029) is a miniature of Ani Cathedral, but with a many-gabled dome such as was common in those days. Armenians were fond of authenticating their buildings with inscriptions. One here plainly records the name of the builder; he was the great and famous Vahran, hero of the resistance offered by the folk of Ani to the Byzantine Caesar. His own descendants piously restored it two centuries later.

The churches thus briefly brought under the reader's observation may be taken as typical of the mediæval architecture of Northern Armenia; some of similar type may be found in the Georgian plain. Otherwise they are unique. They belong to a school of their own, a local growth, developed by Armenian architects on Armenian soil. The elements of the style of course came from elsewhere, but the use made of them, the style itself, owed little to any outside influence.



ST. RIPSIME, EDGMIATSIN.

little churches belong essentially to the land of their origin. There on its bare plains and beside its rock-bound ravines and rivulets they are at home. They match the soil out of which they grew and the rocks from which they were hewn.

Fortunately, where Russia has spread her protecting hand over the Armenians their long persecution comes to an end. Even Russia, however, has only recently begun to learn that it is useless to try and alter this tough race. They cannot be Russified any more than they could be Ottomanised. Already the Russian armies have driven out the Turks from large districts of Armenia which they have depressed for centuries. The recent achievements of the Grand Duke Nicholas in the Caucasian theatre of the world war encourages the hope that the Turkish policy of exterminating the Armenian may soon be checked. If peace thus descends upon the stricken plains after the war, the little villages and cities will rise again from their ruins, and the old churches may be repaired and saved for future generations. They are well worth saving. None of them has yet been properly studied and they are beautiful enough to deserve the most careful study and the most scrupulous preservation and repair. Some day we may yet learn that Western Europe owes to Armenia an artistic debt, and that the resemblance observable between Gothic and Armenian church interiors is not a mere accident.

THE ROLL OF HONOUR.

"I called in my need, and they came."

The words, in letters of flame,
Are carved on the heart of the Empire and
shall to the end remain.

They went in their youth and their might,
Undaunted into the fight,
Eager only to strike a blow for the Land
that stands for the Right.

Gladly they gave their all,
Counting it honour to fall
For the great little Land with her silent
scorn of the mean and the small.

Now all are enshrined the same,
Crowned with undying fame,
In words that blaze through the ages
"I called in my need, and they came."

M. I. HOPE.